

750 words

Gov. Ritter: Balancing plan reflects values, minimizes pain, maintains investments

By Gov. Bill Ritter Jr.

Over the past few months, I have worked closely with lawmakers to erase nearly \$1.5 billion in recession-caused budget shortfalls. This week, I presented a new plan to close an additional \$318 million gap, with even more reductions to come in the months ahead.

These are not easy times for any of us. I grew up in a big family of modest means. There were periods when my father couldn't find work, when the only way my mother could put dinner on the table was with food stamps. I know what it's like to struggle, and I know families and businesses across Colorado continue to hurt.

That's why I approached this round of budget cutting and balancing so thoughtfully, surgically and compassionately. We've made great progress the past 2½ years investing in education, healthcare, the economy and infrastructure. This balancing plan reflects the same smart investment strategy, the same ethic of efficiency and the same culture of cost-cutting I've instilled in state government since January 2007.

This plan also strikes a fiscally responsible balance that minimizes pain, protects essential safety-net services, and maintains investments in our children and our future that will allow us to recover stronger, healthier and quicker.

There are more than 100 separate line-item reductions in this plan. It eliminates 270 positions and closes beds at the state psychiatric hospital in Fort Logan and at a regional care facility in Grand Junction. Along with earlier cuts, this plan lowers spending levels by 9 percent compared with a year ago.

I worked hard to soften impacts and ensure that eliminated services will be effectively provided at the community level. Nevertheless, there is still much pain, much sacrifice and much to dislike in this plan. There will be no shortage of criticism.

Some will say I should have called the legislature back for a special session to eliminate special-interest tax credits. Some will say I didn't cut enough services or lay off enough employees. And some will attack an innovative Department of Corrections plan as jeopardizing public safety.

It was important to me to reduce spending and achieve greater efficiencies. I could not support erasing this shortfall by eliminating the very tax credits that keep our businesses and economy competitive with other states. And many of these sales-tax exemptions, such as those on food and pharmaceuticals, protect consumers all across Colorado.

To those who say we didn't cut enough, I say we cut exactly what we needed in order to balance the budget and ensure that in this tough economy, we can meet the skyrocketing demands for government services. And employees are doing their part through layoffs, a hiring freeze, frozen salaries and unpaid furlough days.

While the economic downturn poses challenge after challenge, it also created an opportunity to enact a recommendation from the Colorado Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice that fits within my ongoing anti-prison-recidivism initiative.

As part of this balancing plan, we will save \$20 million through a pilot program that will:

- Accelerate the transition from parole to community for eligible parolees.
- Enhance supervision and education, job-training and treatment services for new parolees.
- Accelerate the transition from prison to parole for parole-eligible inmates whose mandatory release date is within 180 days anyway.

I was a criminal prosecutor for 25 years, and I am always looking for more efficient and effective ways to manage limited criminal justice resources without compromising public safety. This pilot program is based on research, evidence and experience. More than half of all states are adjusting their corrections and sentencing procedures in the face of declining revenues.

In the weeks and months ahead, I will be working closely with the legislature and my department heads to implement this entire balancing plan and to prepare the fiscal 2010-11 budget, which is due to the Joint Budget Committee on Nov. 1. With revenues continuing to decline, I once again will put all balancing options back on the table.

While the economy has slowed us down, it hasn't stopped us. Colorado remains in better shape than most other states thanks to the wise investments we've made the past few years.

My vision remains strong: to create jobs of the future, to build a New Energy Economy, to make Colorado a national leader in education and healthcare reform.

Even in these tough times, the strategy is working. Together, we'll come out of this downturn more determined than ever.